

RON KIND REPORTS FROM IRAQ

The next 60 days will tell us whether there is hope in Iraq or if it is becoming hopeless. Recently, I returned from my third trip to Iraq, where I checked on the status of our troops and gauged the process being made. Our men and women in uniform are doing a terrific job under difficult and dangerous circumstances. We owe them a debt of gratitude that can never be repaid. They are well-trained and well-motivated. In short, they represent the best America has to offer, and they are our best ambassadors. Those with whom I had the honor to spend time felt that progress is being made but also acknowledged how difficult the conditions are.

It was a sentiment echoed by our military leadership who are the first to emphasize that the battle for Iraq's future will not be won by military means but through the political process. That process will be put to the test in the coming months with two important votes: the national referendum on October 15th to either ratify or reject Iraq's new Constitution, followed by the national elections on December 15th for the Parliament.

These pending votes will help clarify what has been a very murky picture thus far. The outcomes will tell us whether it is worth staying or whether the time has come to start bringing those brave men and women home to their families.

If you want to know what the debate raging inside Iraq is about today, you need only to read our own Federalist Papers. It is the struggle to find balance between a strong central government versus state and local control. It is also the concern that the tyranny of one authoritarian leader must not be replaced by the tyranny of the majority. It is the

debate that endures in our country today and like us, the Iraqis must decide the ultimate outcome.

Whether Iraq becomes a peaceful, stable country with a representative government that respects human rights and religious diversity depends on two questions, I believe: are the Iraqi citizens capable of seeing themselves as Iraqis first or will they only see themselves as Shia, Sunni, or Kurd? And will the hope for a unified Iraq be enough to triumph over the ill-will harbored among people who were pitted against one another under the manipulative, authoritarian rule of Saddam Hussein?

Democracy, I believe, was never meant to be easy. You really have to want it in order to make it work, especially where it has never existed before. I don't know if a united and democratic Iraq is possible, but I do believe it is in our vital interest to find out. A successful Iraq in the Middle East could prove to be a powerful catalyst for reform in a region of the world that is in desperate need of reform.

Now is the time for Iraq's George Washington, James Madison and Thomas Jefferson to show themselves; but it is very hard for a moderate, unifying national leader to emerge from a cauldron of violence and chaos. There is only so much we can do for them. Only the Iraqis can decide what type of future they desire. Will it be conflict resolution through the political process or will it be civil war? These next two months will give us an idea.